Eleven workers die amidst oil spill that can be seen from space

Eva Rowe's parents were among the 15 who died that day in Texas City: "A worker who actually worked at the plant collapsed to the floor crying, telling me he was so sorry that he couldn't find my parents, that he'd been looking for them since the explosion happened. So then I knew," she recalled.

"My parents were my best friends, they're all I had. My life ended that day. BP ruined my life. It ended my life. That day I had to start all over."

After several high-profile work accidents in the U.S. over the past several months, we are faced again with the tragic deaths of 11 workers on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Deepwater Horizon, a semi-submersible drilling rig off the southern coast of the U.S. caught fire two weeks ago, killing 11 workers and leading to a massive environmental catastrophe.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has said that the spill spans more than 60 miles across, with some of the spill reaching Louisiana's beaches, wreaking havoc on the local environment, as well as the shrimp and tourist industries.

A congressional committee has been created to investigate the failure of a “blowout preventer” on the rig, as well as other pieces of safety equipment which seem to have failed.

The investigation will have to uncover who is responsible for the disaster. There are three companies which have operated on the rig – BP, which bankrolled the exploration; Transocean, which owned and operated the vessel; and Halliburton, which did cement work on the ocean floor.

It should come as no surprise that the company bankrolling this disaster, BP spent $3,650,000 in lobbying expenses in 2006 alone, no doubt to influence regulations. The company is one of the largest oil corporations in the world.

According to Beyond Petroleum (formerly British Petroleum, or BP), the rig was drilling 18,000 feet down to get to pockets of gas and oil under pressure when it caught fire.

The rig reportedly lacked a last-ditch safety valve, an “acoustic switch,” that could have potentially averted the massive oil spill. Such safety mechanisms are common in many oil rich countries around the world, but are not mandated in the U.S. because of their high cost.

A History of Neglect:

This is not the first time BP has had a catastrophic breakdown at one of its facilities. The company has a history of unsafe work conditions and environmental problems, largely due to cost cutting measures a congressional committee once described as “draconian.”

In 2006, BP pleaded guilty to felony charges after an explosion at their facility in Texas City, Texas, killed 15 workers and injured 170 others.

Carolyn Merritt, chairman of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, told reporters while investigating the Texas explosion that:

“[These] things do not have to happen. They are preventable. They are predictable, and people do not have to die because they’re earning a living,”

She was right. Investigators at the sight found problems everywhere:

“There were three key pieces of instrumentation that were actually supposed to be repaired that were not repaired. And the management knew this… They authorized the startup [of the machinery which exploded] knowing that these three pieces of equipment were not properly working.”

Despite Bp’s own rules to the contrary, they had parked trailers full of workers in an open area right next to the broken machinery. At the mandatory safety meeting that morning, management didn’t once mention the dangerous procedure that would soon be taking place.

One worker, scared for his safety, wrote his supervisor: “the equipment is in dangerous condition and this is not taken seriously.” Another wrote “this place is set up for a catastrophic failure.”

But management in London didn’t listen, and the company flourished as a result. BP made a profit of $19 billion that year.

Nearly a year afterwards, the company again faced controversy when it was discovered that one of their pipelines had leaked nearly 4,800 barrels of oil into the Alaskan wilderness. The leak was caused by the company’s refusal to check its expansive pipelines in Prudhoe Bay.

In a leaked memo, inspection and quality-assurance specialist Bill Herasymiuk warned BP's corrosion, inspection, and chemical team warned of an impending "catastrophe" if practices in the company were not changed.

Sure enough, four years after it was instructed to inspect it, BP found that a six-mile length of pipeline was corroded.

Political Fallout:

Despite repeated oil disasters of catastrophic proportions, regulation has remained lax. It should come as no surprise that the company bankrolling this disaster, BP, spent $3,650,000 in lobbying expenses in 2006 alone, no doubt to influence regulations. The company is one of the largest oil corporations in the world.

The lobbying has paid off. As it stands today, BP's economic liability in this catastrophic event remains capped at a mere $75 million, thanks to the Oil Pollution Act.

The Act was passed in 1990, in response to the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and enjoyed broad Republican and Democratic support.

Indeed, Democrats have done little better than Republicans in standing up for either workers rights or environmental restoration, despite the widespread support they receive from progressive organizations.

This disaster, however, couldn't have highlighted the futility of supporting the democrats anymore than it has. The catastrophe comes only weeks after Obama announced he would expand offshore drilling, despite repeated campaign promises that he would maintain a ban on the destructive practice.

In response to the explosion, an embarrassed Obama backtracked and suspended the approval process for new wells off of the coast of Virginia, "so that information from the ongoing review of outer continental shelf safety issues that the President has directed can be appropriately considered."

"But," comments Steve Hargreaves of CNN, "leases for new oil wells were not expected for at least a year, whereas the investigation should wrap up in months."

"Thursday's announcement is the first time the Obama administration has actually put the brakes on a plan to open up more areas of the country to offshore drilling.

"Obama has supported increased drilling in the past, and just a month ago opened up a few new areas for drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, off the East Coast and in Alaska."

The orignal, full article can be found at the Trial by Fire.